

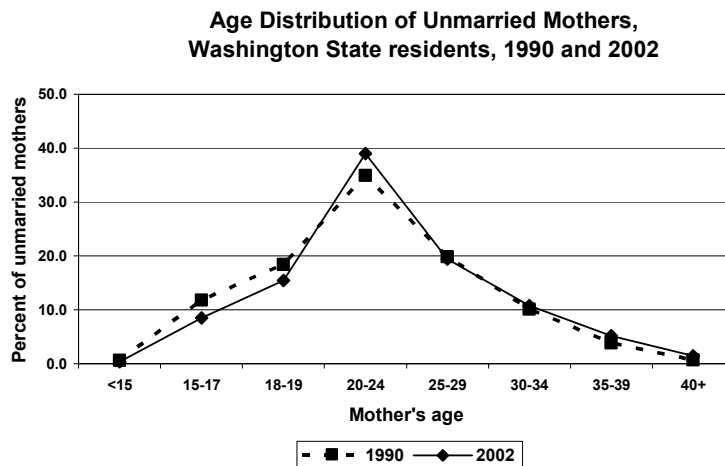
2002 Birth Data Analysis: Unmarried Mothers

‘Marital status’ on the birth certificate indicates whether or not the mother was married to anyone at any time during the pregnancy. This information is important because there are substantial differences in demographics, fertility patterns, and birth outcomes for married and unmarried mothers. This is a concern because the percent of mothers who are unmarried has increased almost ten-fold since 1960.

Common perceptions of unmarried mothers are that they are either teenage school dropouts or well educated professionals delaying childbirth until their later years. The Natality section of this report will tell the story of unmarried mothers in Washington State – who they are and what their pregnancy and birth experiences are. The story begins with Demographics and then continues into Behavioral and Health Characteristics, Health Services Utilization, and Infant Health.

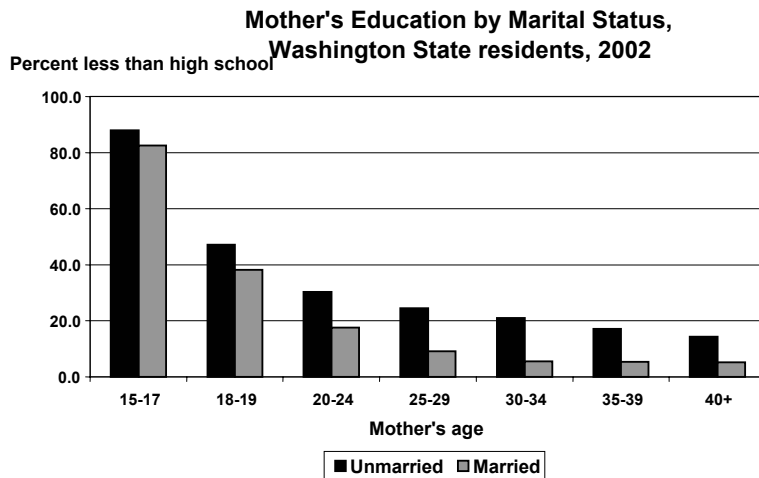
Demographics

How old are they?



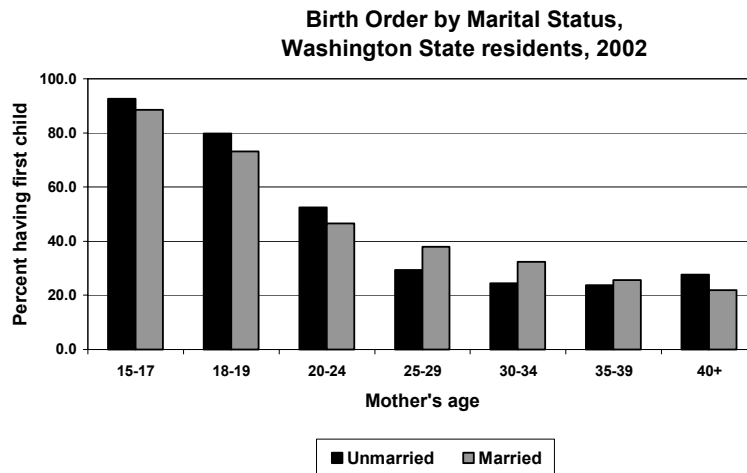
The most common age for unmarried mothers is 20-24. The age distribution of unmarried mothers has changed since 1990, so that today relatively fewer are teens and relatively more are older mothers.

How much education do they have?



For each age group, unmarried mothers more often have less than a high school education. The difference in education between an unmarried mother and her married counterpart is greatest for mothers aged 30 and older. At that age, unmarried mothers are three times as likely to have less than a high school education.

Do they have other children?



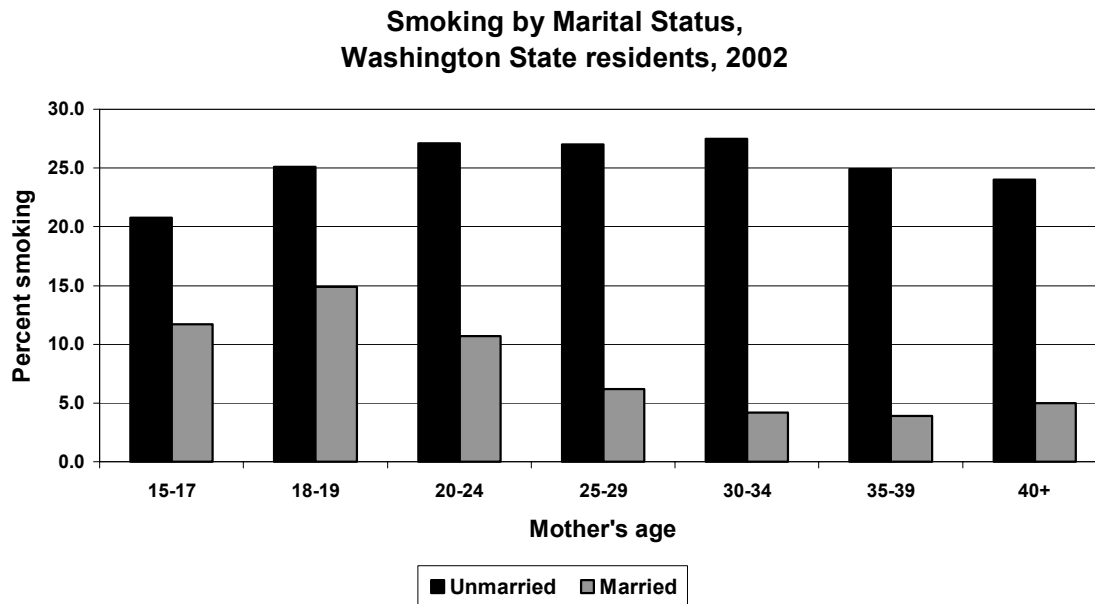
Compared to married mothers, younger (<25) and older (40+) unmarried mothers are having their first child more often, but unmarried mothers aged 25-39 more often have other children in the family.

What do these demographic data tell us? Unlike the common perceptions, unmarried mothers are not predominantly teens, nor are they older educated mothers delaying

childbearing. At each age group, the unmarried mother has less education and for many ages she also has more children. These findings suggest possible economic problems for unmarried mothers of all ages. However, the data are limited because there is no way to tell how many of these unmarried mothers have stable (and financially secure) partners.

Behavioral and Health Characteristics

How often do they smoke?

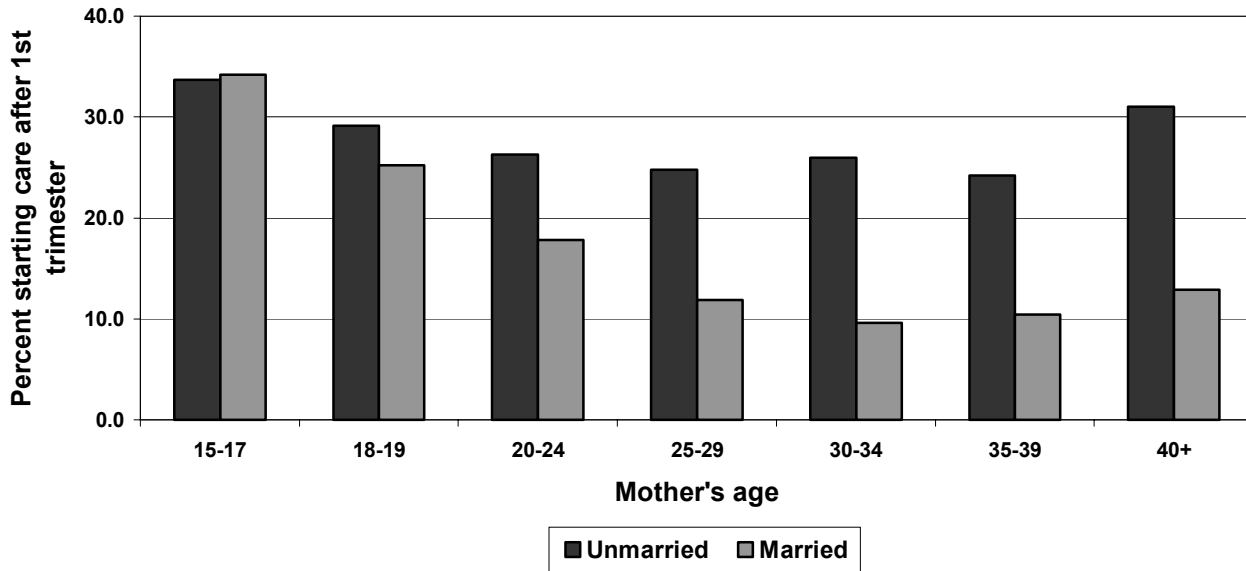


About 25% of unmarried mothers smoke during pregnancy, regardless of their age. In contrast, smoking during pregnancy tends to decrease with age for married mothers. Thus the discrepancy between married and unmarried mothers widens with age; unmarried mothers aged 30-39 are about six times more likely to smoke than their married counterparts. This is a concern because infants born to mothers who smoke during pregnancy are more likely to have low birth weight and to die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Health Services Utilization

When do they begin prenatal care?

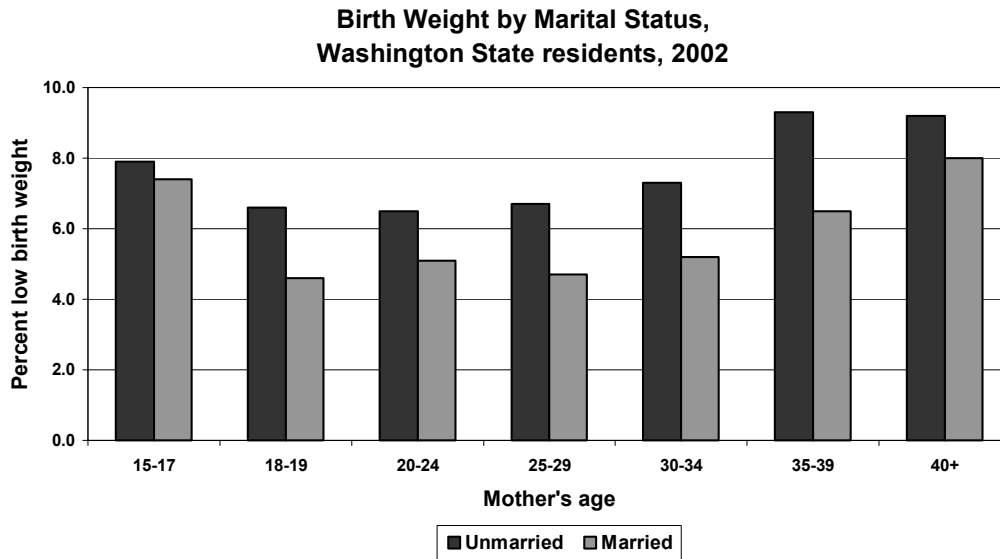
**Prenatal care by Marital Status,
Washington State residents, 2002**



Except for the youngest group, unmarried mothers more often begin prenatal care after the first trimester of their pregnancy, compared to married mothers of the same age group. In particular, unmarried mothers aged 25+ are 2-3 times more likely to begin care after the first trimester. They are also about five times more likely to have late or no care. As the last section showed, unmarried mothers more often smoke during pregnancy. If they had timely prenatal care, their providers could discuss possible problems related to smoking and help them quit or reduce their smoking.

Infant Health

How much do their babies weigh?



Given their later prenatal care and more frequent smoking, it isn't surprising that unmarried mothers are more likely to have low birth weight infants. The difference between married and unmarried mothers is fairly constant for mothers aged 18-39. For these groups, unmarried mothers are 40% more likely to have a low birth weight infant.

All of the information presented here about unmarried mothers - education, birth order, smoking, prenatal care and birth weight - is interrelated and it all tells pretty much the same story. In the absence of any information on their partners, the data suggest that, regardless of their age, unmarried mothers are a group in need of support so that they can have safe pregnancies and healthy babies.